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Learning Skills That Transfer: Using Class Conferences to Teach Critical Thinking

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This qualitative study examines class writing conferences, a conference method that includes all members of the class participating in weekly discussion of written drafts. Fourteen first-year undergraduate composition students and their teacher met for one semester where they participated in class writing conferences. Field notes from class observations and writing conference discussions, written feedback from each student on drafts reviewed during class writing conferences, original drafts and revisions of writing, student interview data, and student survey data are analyzed. Evidence from the data reveals that students were active participants in this method, showing independence in writing decisions and appropriate evaluative response to writing. Use of this method thus created a supportive classroom community, generated positive student experiences with participation in writing conferences, and provided multiple opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking about writing.

Keywords: writing conferences, collaboration, critical thinking

Writing conferences can be a successful way to help writers develop writing ideas. However, this practice must be consciously examined and evaluated for effectiveness since conferencing for the sake of conferencing can not only be ineffective in writing development, but can also discourage student writers. Indeed, as exhibited by multiple practitioners and researchers, writing conferences at the undergraduate level create multiple challenges. Teachers must be aware of the potential dynamics in a teacher-student writing conversation. For example, students may defer to teacher suggestions instead of pursuing their own agenda because they consider the teacher to be the expert or the one with the power (Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo, 1989). Teachers can also discourage instead of encourage student writers. Zinn (1998) points to how critical comments can make students question their writing ability. Students may label themselves as poor writers if they are met with criticism instead of thoughtful response. Not understanding a student's text and responding to it anyway may also influence the outcome of the conference in negative ways (Janangelo, 2010). Students may not understand terms used during

a writing conference, making the conference lose effectiveness (Newkirk, 1995). Teachers making suggestions that do not fit with the writer's purpose can frustrate students (Janangelo, 2010). Conference problems can certainly occur when there is a lack of time to confer. It takes time for a writer to talk through ideas. Time for talk and reflection leads to discovery.

Teachers, then, play a complex role in a writing conference. They must acknowledge the individual writing needs of each student and make decisions during conferences about how to proceed (Kittle, 2008; Newkirk, 1984; Romano, 1987). It takes practice and training for teachers to develop an instinct about when to ask questions and when to let students talk. Yet, teachers may require students to participate in peer conferences without providing adequate practice and training they need to respond effectively. While peer conferences are conversations between classmates, students do not always know what to do when participating in peer writing response (Barron, 1991). Peer conferencing acknowledges the social nature of students, but communication alone does not ensure a successful conference. Such conferences are ineffective when students do not understand the purpose of peer response or when they do not have any models (Barron, 1991). This lack of understanding and direction causes students to not value the opinions of peers about writing (Brammer & Rees, 2007) and to be dissatisfied with the results of peer response (Jesnek, 2011).

Research on group conferences shows that working to define the student role to create more effective feedback is important. Using peer group leaders (Grobman, 1999), previewing student feedback comments before students discuss writing in peer groups (Hacker, 1996; Zhu, 1995), practicing conference skills (Lawrence & Sommers, 1995), and using structured peer collaboration groups (Kinsler, 1990) show that students can and will offer constructive, purposeful feedback when given direction. For example, teacher expertise and peer input were combined in Ching's (2011) study of instructor-led peer conferences. The presence of the teacher during the conference allowed the teacher to facilitate effective student feedback and to "shape group interactions in the moment, to provide...continuous feedback to the feedback being given" (Ching, 2011, p. 107). These dialogues allowed students to see how writing is evaluated and meaning is negotiated. They also allowed the teacher to respond to questions at the moment the query and the writing were relevant and meaningful to students, which is consistent with Vygotsky's (1986) ideas of teaching writing naturally.

While writing workshop has been commonly used in writing classrooms, there has not been a focus in the literature on studying sustained use of class writing conferences in an undergraduate first year composition class. The idea behind the

approach is to give first-year students instruction about how to respond to writing while offering them continued, supported practice in response. This study employed a qualitative approach to examine the usefulness of class conferences as a strategy for both teaching and conducting peer review during one semester of a first-year writing course. In particular, I sought to investigate the ways that class writing conferences extend the concept of instructor-led group conferences by including all members of the class evaluating a single student text. The current study, then, aims to establish if this more systematic approach to conferencing can positively affect learning in first year writing.

Method

Participants

The study participants included an instructor with a Ph.D. in Composition and Rhetoric and fifteen years of experience as a teacher of first year composition and fourteen first-year composition students. There were seven female and seven male students in this spring semester composition class at a small, private university located in the northeast United States that has a course cap of fifteen for composition classes. The class met two times a week for seventy-five minutes during each class period. As the researcher, I attended each class and remained in the setting until all students had the opportunity to submit a paper for a class writing conference, to revise the essay after the conference, and to participate in follow-up interviews. I conducted individual interviews with each student in the class in a writing office suite at the university outside of class time using a set of talking points (See Appendix A).

Instruments

To assess the usefulness of the above described conference method, I collected the following data: field notes from classroom observations of student behavior and writing discussions, student drafts of writing, student comments on drafts of peers' writing, interview data, and survey data.

Classroom observations. Student behaviors and comments made during class were recorded in field notes. Oral participation, voluntary and teacher-initiated, was noted. Questions asked and comments made by students about writing or writing processes were recorded to note any development or lack of development exhibited in their responses throughout the study. There were three writing units during the study: memoir, profile, and research. Four class conferences occurred in the first unit, seven in the second, and two in the third. I attended all classes even when there were no planned conferences.

Student essays. Thirteen students chose to submit an essay for class conference resulting in a total of thirteen class writing conferences during this study. Students received no compensation. Participation was voluntary, and one student did not want to submit an essay for conference. That student did, however, participate in other conferences by offering feedback and adding to discussions about writing. Changes made to the essays were documented and compared to both the field notes from the class discussion and the individual written feedback from the teacher and peers.

Written feedback on drafts. Copies of written feedback given to student writers by peers and the teacher were collected. The amount and type of comments made were noted to see how comments changed over the course of the study.

Interviews. Interviews were conducted with each student after the student's essay had been discussed by the class and the student had revised the paper. Students were interviewed regarding their experience with class writing conferences and the subsequent changes the student writers made to their essays. I used talking points during the interviews, so students could freely discuss their thoughts about the conference process (See Appendix A).

Open-ended survey questions. A survey was created by the researcher to collect information from all fourteen students at the conclusion of the study. The survey consisted of open-ended questions about conference elements, feedback, learned skills, and conference participation. These were designed to elicit description of the students' experiences during the study (See Appendix B).

Research Design

Class conferences followed a five-step conference protocol:

1. The student writer passes out copies of their written draft;
2. The student writer reads paper aloud;
3. All students are given time to silently re-read the paper;
4. The students then write directly on their copy of the draft adding in-text notes and explaining any marks they made on draft. At the end of the draft, the student readers write a letter to the writer first making a specific positive statement about the draft. Then they address higher-order and lower-order concerns (Reigstad & McAndrew, 1984) respectively.
5. A discussion about the essay follows the written response.

Before walking through the conference protocol the first time, the instructor taught specific guidelines for conference participation. She began with a discussion about higher-order and lower-order concerns. A list for each category was generated by

the class. Higher-order concerns included transition statements, content, examples, topic sentences, organization, and development. Lower-order concerns included spelling, grammar, mechanics, word choice, and repetition. As the lists were generated, the teacher spoke of the higher-order concerns as those that occur at the global level, during the drafting and revising stages. The lower-order concerns are at the sentence level and should be focused on during the editing and proofreading stages. During each class conference, students were instructed to address both concerns for each paper.

The instructor then explained the importance of a safe, secure environment, stating that criticism of personal opinions was not acceptable and would cause a student to be excused from the class. She emphasized that students should “Focus on writing, respond to writing, not judging the individual behind writing.” The student role was defined as writers evaluating writing. Students were encouraged to “explore writing, practice writing, and play with language.”

Turning to the conference protocol, the instructor explained that students should listen and take “gut-reaction” notes by underlining and writing marginal notes as the student writer read aloud. Then students could re-read the draft silently expanding on the initial notes. She emphasized that students were expected to write a letter at the end addressing the author by name and clarified that the first item in the letter should be a specific, positive comment, noting that a generic comment like “good job” would not help the writer re-examine the paper while a specific comment like “I can see your friend through your description” would let the writer know what he/she has clearly communicated. She concluded by clarifying that such a comment should be followed first by comments on higher-order concerns and then on lower-order concerns.

The instructor then modeled the protocol through the first class conference. As a student writer read, the other students and teacher followed along on the draft and wrote their “gut-reaction” notes. Once the student stopped reading, the teacher showed the marks she had made on her copy of the draft. First, she held up her draft, and pointed to the different marks she made. Then she passed it around the class for each student to take a closer look. Once each student looked over the circulated draft, the teacher communicated her plan to expand on the markings by explicitly explaining the marks to the student writer. Finally, she spoke about writing her end letter. Her modeling of response gave students clear direction and helped them understand their roles and responsibilities in this process.

Following the instructor’s explanation of her own feedback, students were given time to expand their notes into more explicit feedback after which the discussion

began as all the following discussions would begin: “What has the author done well?” In moderating the discussion, if a student’s comment focused on lower-order suggestions such as sentence combining, the instructor would acknowledge that the student made a valid point, but it was a lower-order concern to be discussed later, thus reiterating the order of the protocol.

After specific, positive comments were communicated, the class turned to addressing higher-order concerns in a back-and forth exchange where all input was allowed. Disagreeing with the teacher was not discouraged as emphasis was placed on viewing all exchanges during the discussion as two writers explaining how they each saw the draft, not a teacher and student viewing the draft. To help the writer, the higher-order discussion included suggestions for global content changes. This generation of ideas allowed students to see possibilities in the essay well beyond their own reading. To clarify how these possibilities might become reality, the teacher offered mini-lessons based on questions students had about specific elements of writing, providing relevant instruction in response to student questions. Lower-order concerns were considered last.

The five-step protocol was followed in each subsequent class conference.

Data Analysis

Class discussions were reviewed to see the level of involvement of the students in the discussion. Changes in involvement were noted. The nature of comments was analyzed for evidence of a progression of student understanding of writing development.

Conferences were also analyzed by student. For each student, I reviewed all of the comments written to other students and comments stated by each student during the discussion. I analyzed all comments, coding them line by line looking for patterns. This process was repeated for each student.

An original draft and a final draft were collected from each student who submitted an essay for class conference. The final draft was analyzed closely to mark all changes made to the draft. Changes were compared to the written comments and comments made during the conference discussion. When I met with each writer for a follow-up interview, I shared the discussion transcript and written comments with each writer. I had highlighted all changes and made notes about where each change could have come from based on the written comments from others and the subsequent conference discussion. During the interview, I asked the student writers about each change, if they could identify the reason for the change, and if they could share their thinking about why they made the change. The writer’s

reasons for specific revisions were noted. The origin of the change was noted if communicated. Student comments about the conference method being studied were also noted. I collected and coded all of this information and compared it to the class response data.

Finally, the survey data was compared to the data offered by each student to look for consistencies and inconsistencies. The survey data was used to confirm findings in the other data as well as to re-evaluate data based on the experiences communicated by each writer.

After data was analyzed for each individual student, it was analyzed across students. Constant comparative analysis was used to compare the data within and across students to note emergent themes.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the data revealed the following themes:

- There were changes in student writing and the way they talked about writing.
- Student responses and revision decisions showed independent thinking.
- Teacher authority became less significant to students as they gained more confidence in their own writing ideas.
- Student participation in writing discussions increased as the study progressed.
- Students focused more on content than grammar in their evaluation of writing.

Participation in class conferences gave students experience thinking about writing, discussing writing, and evaluating their own learning processes. The following sections illustrate students' active involvement and subsequent development from these conferences.

Changes in Writing and Talk about Writing

During class conferences, students discussed writing, and then they revised their essays. Students changed their writing after participating in a class conference. As the study progressed, they also changed the way they talked about writing. Students gave specific, individual response to writers based on the needs of the writers.

Revising and editing. All students revised their conferenced essays, making content, or higher-order, changes. Twelve of the thirteen students submitting revisions also made lower-order changes, correcting grammar mistakes present in the first draft.

The most basic changes happened in the first unit. Four students (Kelsey, Lisa, Matt, and Jack¹) had class conferences during the unit on memoir. The first changes were of a simple nature as exemplified by Kelsey's revision. Her revision included answering student questions, adding details, and changing support sentences to match the topic sentence. Lower-order changes included addition of an author after a quote, a word change, and comma changes.

Lisa's conference discussion was interrupted by the end of the class. The teacher suggested that the class continue the discussion during the following class period, but when Lisa got sick, she ended up revising her essay using only the written comments. Lisa focused on lower order concerns that the teacher had noted in her written response, and she added more information to her conclusion in response to student questions.

Many of these changes were what I would consider surface level changes, and they are representative of revisions I have seen from beginning writers. The first two students in this unit focused on small changes that could be made easily. This disconnect showed me that the students needed more practice with response to writing. Because those were the first two conferences, the students were tentative with their comments and unsure about their own knowledge of writing. General responses were given like when Jack told Lisa, "I think you have a very good topic here. It is a good topic that you can build on to make a great essay." While his words are encouraging, they do not offer specific feedback that helps a writer focus on revision.

The conferences continued, and the repeated use of the conference protocol gave students more exposure to how to respond to and improve their writing. When Jack wrote about his grandmother, he received specific feedback about his paragraphing. One student stated that there should be "one paragraph, one idea," which the other students started discussing. This made a difference in Jack's revision when he created new paragraphs and made his essay easier to follow. This was a slight shift from the previous revisions, but it was a shift that helped the student writers consider the audience of their writing. As students grew comfortable with the conference process, revision began to change.

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

The most significant changes during the first unit were made by Matt after his class conference. Matt had submitted his essay about his Ultimate Frisbee team to the teacher for feedback days before his class conference. He listened to her feedback, thought about his essay, and then submitted his essay to the class conference before making any changes. He had formed a plan and wanted to get additional feedback, so he could evaluate if his revision ideas were good. The time between the initial submission to the teacher and the submission to the class allowed Matt the opportunity to reflect both on the teacher's suggestions and his own ideas.

There was a section in the third paragraph about Matt not being named as the captain of the team. That part distracted many readers because they thought he was upset. Matt wanted readers to know that it actually motivated him. Before the reading, he thought of specific revisions he wanted to make. He had goals that were inspired by that situation, and he thought of adding those goals, but he waited to hear response from his classmates. Matt said, "People thought I was hurt—I made it into a positive. I set goals." The feedback from the class confirmed his thinking, and that affected the way he revised his paper when he added his three goals and carried that theme throughout his paragraphs.

Matt's introduction also changed because of his class conference experience. The draft he shared contained the following introduction:

Throughout my life there have been many events that have shaped me as a person. I cannot say that I have encountered many tragedies in my life and for that I am grateful. I hope I have many more great events happen to me in the future. It was difficult to think of just one that has had the most impact on me, but I think the event that has had the greatest impact on my life so far is going to the national ultimate Frisbee tournament this past summer.

This introduction was not the first thing that students focused on during Matt's conference, but the comments that led to Matt changing the introduction grew from other comments voiced during the discussion. Kenny suggested that Matt add more detail, which led to a mini-lesson on adding details. Kenny said, "Maybe go into more description about what it is. Go more into the feelings. It was a great feeling. Give more about that."

The teacher continued the detail discussion by referring to the mentor text students read before class:

“How does that open?”

Kelsey answered, “It starts off the paper with the setting of the summer day.”

The teacher added, “You can make inferences about the author based on details included...Not just tell the facts, but share the story. Details...create the story...show us.”

The discussion about details led to Megan’s comments about Matt’s introduction. Megan brought up the idea of needing an attention-getting introduction, and Sofia wrote to Matt on the draft: “Open with a game. Smell of the grass, weather, sounds of whistles and players, how the Frisbee falls in your hand.” Matt said this student suggestion about how to add details to the introduction helped him create his hook. Matt wrote the following introduction in his revision:

It was flying through the air like [sic] a jet, a white blur in the sky, I’m getting this Frisbee I told myself. I was running the fastest I’ve ever ran [sic] in my life, my heart was racing even faster, I’m getting this Frisbee I kept telling myself. I was closer now, so close and the end zone in sight too. I jumped up and caught it with both hands and looked where I landed, in the end zone, point scored. My teammates ran at me and all jumped on me to celebrate the score. Once everyone stopped mugging me with excitement it finally hit me. I’m playing in the National Ultimate Frisbee Tournament, I reached my goal.

Matt’s revision revealed that he looked at his whole essay and developed a plan. He was concerned with his audience and with clearly communicating his meaning. He created an attention-getting, lively introduction that better fit his story. During his post-conference interview with me, Matt said, “The day before I read, I edited more. I had it in my mind to put three goals in. People’s comments confirmed. I knew it first—they confirmed.” He felt the class conference validated his own revision ideas, and he discussed how he came up with his new introduction: “People said a hook was needed. Sofia suggested starting with a game. I saw her comment and thought of the tournament game.” Matt considered the comments from others as he thought about his essay. He did not simply fix parts; he was able to take a global view in his revision and create a better essay.

The conference process offered students multiple ways to get feedback. Reading essays aloud helped students to see where they were missing information.

Students used the discussion to inform their revisions. Olivia added details to her essay about her softball team captain after hearing from her classmates: “They said they did not know who Cait was, what she has done for team...After I was told, who is Cait? Then I saw it was missing.” Although Olivia originally thought her ideas were clear, seeing the reactions from her classmates was an effective way to help her realize her explanation was incomplete.

Ben’s revision was a mixture of content changes and grammar corrections. Ben wrote an essay about his grandfather. He jumped right into the essay in the introductory paragraph:

There’s [sic] been many people in my life that had [sic] been a large influences [sic] on my life such as my mother, father, sister and my grandmother but the person who had the biggest influences [sic] is the same person who has been in my life the least witch [sic] is my grandfather...

Ben wrote this sentence as most of his introduction paragraph and then moved to the next paragraph, leaving readers with questions about what Ben’s grandfather looked like and why Ben chose to title his essay “The Old Man.”

Ben responded to the questions by adding details to his essay showing his grandfather and connecting to the title:

There have been many people in my life who have had a huge influence on my life such as my mother, father, sister, and my grandmother. The person who has had the biggest influences [sic] is the person that has been in my life the least “the old man”. [sic] Standing tall at six feet one, weighing close to 150 pound [sic], with a bold [sic] head you can see the sun’s reflection off of it, with yellow tan skin, and eyes as red as the Red Sox cap he loves to wear. He is built like a bull but is as soft as a pillow.

Ben corrected grammar mistakes in the first sentences, but then he went on to create a picture of his grandfather that he had not included in the first draft. Getting feedback from classmates and participating in discussions about writing helped students reconsider their writing and improve their essays.

Writing talk. All conference discussions included specific talk about writing skills. Jack’s paper about his grandmother elicited personal responses from the students. The discussion began with the emotions that Jack put into his paper.

Emma commented that Jack asked questions in the first paragraph and answered the questions at the end. Matt talked about the transitions between paragraphs, and Sofia mentioned the universal theme of losing a loved one. There were unanswered questions according to the students. Jack stated that he was young at the time and unsure about some of the details. The idea of “unpacking” came up, which had been discussed in a mini-lesson during a previous conference. Unpacking was explained as expanding on ideas presented in the essay and telling the rest of the story. Students were looking for more details, and they used a new term they had learned during the first conference to explain what was needed in the essay. Through experience with conferencing, they were learning language that helped them discuss writing specifically.

Since Jack was writing memoir, the class discussed where the essay shifted to profile about the main character instead of the focus on the author. Students compared passages in the essay to what they understood as the writing task. They identified parts where Jack strayed from memoir writing. Students helped Jack re-focus while exhibiting their understanding of the genre.

Each of the class conferences included specific talk about writing skills. Higher-order concerns discussed included focus, theme, tone, transitions, introductions, details, and character development. Lower-order concerns discussed included paragraphing, sentence combining, word choice, and punctuation. Discussions were not only specific about writing skills, but they also included talk specific to the needs of the individual writers.

Individualized response. Although in the first two conferences, students gave basic responses, their responses changed as they continued to participate in class conferences. Students responded to the specific needs of writers in written and oral comments. Talk about writing changed depending on the writing the student writer presented for class conference.

Olivia wrote a five-paragraph essay that was not in the order that she presented ideas. The class discussed how to break her out of that format and how to help her organize her ideas.

Megan wrote a story from her childhood that left out pertinent details. Students asked specific details like characters’ names to help her add known details. They also let her know other questions they had, so Megan would have direction for her revision.

Jeff's essay about both his mother and a family cottage caused conflict during the discussion. The teacher had suggested that he pick one topic or the other as his focus. Both Jack and Kyle disagreed, saying the two themes complemented each other and were intertwined. There were other questions about the content and style. Emma asked about family history that was underlying the reunion at the cottage. Kelsey stated, "The second paragraph does not match with the first." Lisa asked for clarification about the dream job mentioned in the essay. Caroline wanted Jeff to describe one of the memories he mentioned. The students paid close attention to what was in Jeff's essay and let him know where he left readers wondering.

Ben had multiple grammar errors and undeveloped paragraphs in his essay about his grandfather. Students first offered encouraging words. Kelsey said, "I like how well you expressed the influence he had on you through the stories."

Matt wrote, "I like the idea you have going you just need to expand it more."

Olivia commented, "You do a great job starting to show and not tell. You started going into details. Don't stop!"

Megan said, "It seems like you and your grandfather have a very close relationship and I enjoy that you can share it with all of us."

Sofia wrote a note to Ben at the end of the essay: "This is a great story about your grandfather and how he shaped your decision to stay in school and I hope that is going well." Students could have focused on the multiple grammar errors, but instead, they approached his essay positively. The students' responses to Ben's paper showed their support for him and their desire to help him improve his writing.

When responding to writing, students focused on the writing shared. Students offered individualized evaluation to student writers. This evaluation required student investment in the conference process. Students stayed actively involved during the reading of essays and subsequent written response. Practice with evaluation helped them to improve their skills, which was evidenced by the way they adjusted their response based on the specific writer.

Independent Thinking

Student thinking about writing was revealed in written feedback and class discussions, revisions of essays, interviews about revisions, and the end-of-study survey comments. Students showed evidence of independent thinking in their own

writing decisions and the feedback offered to others as shown in the following examples.

Independent writing decisions. Emma showed independent thinking in her writing decisions. In her paper about her stepfather, Emma wrote a paragraph about the struggles her family faced after her father left. The second paragraph of her essay concluded: “Then, she met him.” To Emma, this sentence signified the change between two time periods in her life. When it was suggested by multiple students during class conference that Emma rework the sentence, she thought about it. She decided to keep her sentence because, as she stated in her interview, “I thought it was powerful.” The questions from the class caused Emma to think critically about her writing choice. This thinking gave her more confidence about the decision she made.

As previously noted, Matt conferred with the teacher before sharing his essay in a class conference. He received feedback from the teacher about adding a title, developing the second paragraph, and adding descriptive language like the mentor text used for class. She stated where more detail was needed: “All of those details need to come before [Matt] tells me what this accomplishment means to him.”

Faced with this feedback, Matt went back to his paper. He thought about how he could show the details that would complete the paper and make his explanation at the end clearer to readers. Matt explained his thinking: “I had set three goals. The day before I read [during class conference], I edited more. I had it in my mind to put three goals in.” Matt, however, did not change any of the content based on his teacher’s feedback. He planned his revision in response to her feedback, but he wanted feedback from the class first to see if their response would match with his planned writing. Below is Matt’s original third paragraph he read to the class:

By the time I was a senior I reached my full potential as a player. But the one thing that really motivated me going into my senior season was not being named one of the captains on the team. Not being named captain was maybe the best thing to happen to me as a player. I wanted to prove to everyone I was the best player on the team and one of the best in the state.

During his class conference, Matt was bombarded with questions about not being named captain of the team. Students were confused about why Matt considered it a good thing. When Matt heard the questions, his thinking about the

revisions started to solidify. He stated during his interview that the students' comments confirmed his writing plans. He said, "I knew it first—they confirmed." After the class conference, Matt revised the end of his third paragraph:

Not being named captain was [removed maybe] the best thing to happen to me as a player. Captain was an honor I wanted to say I had, but I did not end up getting it. I will never forget this moment in my life though. That night when I wasn't named captain I set three goals for myself for the next season. One is being named MVP of the team next year, two is being named to the all-star game next year. And three is playing for the New England team at Nationals next year. I made all three of those goals happen.

Matt's revision shows a plan for the whole essay. He carries the three goals through the essay, showing how he accomplished each one. The teacher's call for details caused Matt to return to his essay and critically evaluate how he put his story together. He determined that the missing details also confused readers because readers were not following his meaning. His thinking about how to complete his paper happened in steps because he wanted time to reflect on the changes, and he wanted additional input before deciding that his planned changes would work.

Kyle presented another example of independent writing decisions. He wrote his profile about a high school football team making it to the championship and how it affected the town. Kyle wrote his paper as an observer: "The season had completely changed how a town had felt about their football program. From weak and barely worth watching to exciting, action packed, and creating a must go to event..." During the class conference, Kyle was asked about his connection to the team and about the events of the championship. Kyle listened to the feedback before revising his paper. His revision, however, differed from what I expected. Kyle's interview comments revealed his thinking. He stated that the feedback he received, "makes me think they are missing the point. I need to make sure they know it's not important." He did not let the feedback change his plan; he focused his revision on clearly communicate his meaning.

Students received both oral and written feedback on their essays from the teacher and all the students present for the conference. The feedback offered them options for their writing, so they could make decisions about their own writing based on their purpose and intended meaning. Responses revealed if readers understood the intended meaning. Students could evaluate how the feedback fit with their writing plans. Participating in class writing conferences gave students a new experience with getting feedback. When discussing writing, they actively

exchanged ideas with several others, and this writing talk happened regularly. Students got immediate feedback about their ideas. They could see that their ideas were valued, which added to their confidence with writing evaluation.

Revision evolved after participation in class writing conferences. The discussions supported students' thinking. Writers' options were discussed, allowing students to understand their own authority when making writing decisions. Students learned that they did not have to respond specifically to each individual comment, but rather, they had to consider the feedback in relation to their writing plans. They retained the ownership of their writing and made independent writing decisions after careful consideration of feedback and their own intended meaning. Independent thinking about writing led to other independent learning behaviors.

Independent learning behaviors. Reading aloud helped students hear language, and the conference process encouraged students to develop independent learning behaviors.

Reading aloud. Fifty-four percent of participants (seven of thirteen who shared essays) made unsolicited comments about the benefits of reading aloud. One thing that students noticed was how reading out loud helped them with evaluating their own writing. It gave them an opportunity to review the paper again. Students were forthcoming about not wanting to read their essays aloud. Olivia said, "I did not want to share." However, the experience of reading aloud changed Olivia's perceptions of the practice; she saw that it helped her writing process. She stated that it was "easier to see mistakes when read out loud."

Megan discussed reading aloud in her post-conference interview. After Megan noticed word repetition in her essay when she read aloud, she duplicated the process with her revision when she "read out loud to [her] roommate" because she could "hear her mistakes." She found the skill so valuable that she started using it on her own.

Jack thought some sentences "sounded awkward" when he read aloud, so he decided to revise sentences that sounded incorrect to him.

Brooke said she "realized I mentioned characters and didn't explain. I thought about that as I read."

The protocol of the class writing conference gave students a specific skill to help them with their writing processes. Students heard their mistakes, listened to their language, and thought through their ideas as they read aloud. They noticed

how reading aloud affected their writing processes. Students progressed from evaluation of one element of the conference process to evaluation of their own learning processes as they developed independent learning behaviors.

Self-Evaluation. Even though the class writing conferences can be viewed as a collaborative experience, the skills learned added to students' independent processes. Students asked questions during conferences when they were confused about meaning. Olivia stated the benefits of those questions: "I think it will make me more independent in the next paper. Know questions to ask myself. Even when I was reading Kelsey's comments, [I could] hear her voice asking questions, hear her saying it." This helped Olivia critically read her own writing.

During Megan's conference, students commented on the missing transition that Megan had noticed. Megan had evaluated her own writing, and her evaluation was confirmed by others in the class. Just like with Matt's addition of the three goals into his essay, this experience helped Megan to see that her self-evaluation was a good evaluation.

Jeff stated that he learned new skills during each conference. As a result, when it is time for him to revise a paper, he "looks at all of the stuff we've been going over in class." Class conferences provided foundational skills for writing response.

Students developed questions they ask themselves when revising papers. Lisa and Brooke ask, "Does this make sense?" Brooke also questions the order of her paper.

Ben asks himself, "What can I do better?"

Jeff wonders if he is answering the main question or if he strays from the subject. Emma evaluates her writing after each paragraph, asking, "What still needs to be fixed?"

Kyle has a series of questions for himself while revising: "Do I have right format? Transitions? [Do] paragraphs make sense?" Korey asks himself about his thesis statement.

Olivia asks, "Who is the audience? How will they look at writing? [Will they be] able to understand it?"

Although the questions differ between participants, it is clear that the class conferences have helped the students to look critically at their own writing and develop skills to help them evaluate that writing. This conference method provided a model of inquiry for students, but in the development of questions, students have shown that they are working on their own evaluative processes, a phenomena noted by Murray (1979). While participating in this conference method, students exhibited independent thinking when making decisions about their writing. They thought about practices that helped them with their writing process. Megan said, “With every conference, I could take away something to use with my paper.” Students learned from the conferences and began to develop their own evaluative processes, which helped them gain confidence in their thinking.

Emma discussed her growing writing confidence in her post-conference interview when she shared that her experience was helping her know what to write in her Psychology reflection essays. She was able to transfer the skills she learned through her conference experience to a major class, and she expressed confidence in her ability to write those essays.

As students gained confidence in their own ideas, they made decisions based on their writing plans. Jeff stated that feedback offered new possibilities, “Seeing how my classmates would have tweaked my paper in every way possible really opened up doors to new ideas that I could expand on.” Feedback was given to aid students in their writing development, not to undermine the authority of the writer. The focus on independent thinking and individual writing choices led students to not only make independent decisions about writing, but it also led to the development of independent learning behaviors. Students’ development of independent learning behaviors caused them to be less dependent on the teacher’s response when they revised the content in their essays.

Teacher Authority

Students enter first-year undergraduate composition classes with varying abilities. Because not all students are confident in their writing abilities, they may defer to the teacher’s suggestions, thinking the teacher’s ideas are the right ideas. Students reinforce teacher authority by asking the teacher questions (Newkirk, 1995) and attempting to respond to all feedback instead of considering the intended meaning of the writing. Class writing conferences include teacher feedback, but the teacher is only one of the many respondents to students’ writing. Students in this study were more likely to follow the teacher’s suggestions about grammar than her suggestions about content. Content was up for negotiation as students considered ideas from all people involved in the process before making decisions.

There are several examples of students following the teacher's grammar suggestions closely. However, a new pattern emerged as the class conferences unfolded when it came to content comments. Disagreement with the teacher about a content issue happened in the first conference when Jack disagreed with the teacher's opinion. Jack's comments empowered Kelsey to speak up during the discussion and share her concerns about personal boundaries. A productive discussion followed. The teacher readily granting students authority to disagree allowed students to see that their input was valued and encouraged.

During Jeff's conference, the teacher stated that Jeff had two main ideas, but Lisa disagreed, saying, "I like how he is focused on one topic." A discussion began about whether students thought Jeff's paper was about his mother or a family cottage. There was a vote with two students thinking it was about his mother, four students thinking it was about the cottage, and other students not sure. The teacher suggested that Jeff pick one topic and make it clear.

Jack disagreed with the teacher about picking one topic. He did think that there was more than one idea, but he liked how Jeff put his essay together. The teacher suggested that Jeff bring one idea to the foreground and asked how others felt. Jack said, "I feel like it is hard to separate the memories."

Kyle added, "Include mother and memories as part of the description." Jeff discussed this exchange in his post-conference interview, saying it helped him figure out how to highlight his intended meaning in his revision. Had he only feedback from the teacher, he may have made a decision on his writing that strayed from his purpose.

This discussion shows how students listened to teacher input but did not feel compelled to follow it unquestioningly. The conversations between members of the class included thoughts about the author's meaning, so students could freely share ideas to be considered without worrying about whether they agreed with the teacher. Class writing conferences included discussions with free exchanges of ideas where the teacher's opinions about content were not perceived by the group as the definitive opinion. Students openly disagreed with the teacher and each other as they evaluated writing and negotiated meaning. They considered comments from all participants as they contemplated writing options and critically thought about their essays.

Reflection began with the talk about writing during conferences (Fredrick, 2009); the intervals between the conferences gave students the time to think about new ideas and try to make meaning (Bruner, 1960; Jensen, 2005; Zull, 2002). This

cycle of talking, thinking, and evaluating enabled students to not only begin to exhibit independent thinking about writing, but more importantly, to understand how writing talk can positively affect their writing processes.

Writing Talk Participation

With groups, there is the opportunity for people to stay in the background. Students in this study could participate quietly by listening to student writers reading and by offering written feedback. Discussions offered another way for students to participate in writing talk. During the class conferences, students were able to venture their ideas and be heard. Participation varied between individuals, but all students participated in talk about writing during discussions.

During the first conference, only six students spoke: Lisa, Jack, Sofia, Kelsey, Emma, and Jeff. The discussion was lively and included the divergent ideas of the teacher and two students. The other students were looking up during the discussion and referencing the essay when someone pointed out a passage, but they did not verbally contribute. The six students who participated in the first discussion may have felt more comfortable speaking in class than those who remained silent, but they provided an example to the other students about responding to writing. The teacher's involvement in the conference and her exchanges with the students gave all participants an example of writing talk and shared problem solving.

The first conference included students who volunteered to speak. The rest of the students were able to listen in on the discussion and get acclimated to the environment.

During the second conference day, the discussion began with input from Emma, Kelsey, Jack, and Sofia—four of the six students who participated in the first discussion. The teacher eased other students into the discussion. Since Matt was writing his paper about Ultimate Frisbee, the teacher suggested that others may not know the sport. Korey nodded his head, and Olivia raised her hand, both confirming what the teacher said. The teacher asked, “Why do we need to know?”

Sofia answered, “Because if you don’t know what it is, you don’t know what it takes to get on the team.”

The teacher then asked, “Anybody know anyone who goes overboard in enthusiasm?”

Kyle answered, “Yeah.”

The teacher then asked about show, don't tell, which prompted Kenny to suggest adding description and emotion. He pointed to where Matt had said something was a great feeling, and Kenny encouraged him to elaborate.

The participants doubled from four to eight with the gentle prodding of the teacher. Even though Korey and Olivia participated non-verbally, they were brought into the discussion because their input was wanted. The teacher then called on Brooke, who asked, "Are you still playing? Do you want to continue?"

The teacher asked for more input. She addressed Megan. "Megan, you've been quiet."

Megan replied, "Add more details. The transitions are good."

The teacher then asked her what questions she had, and Megan replied with an important statement that Matt later focused on during his revision, "He doesn't have something that pulls us in, attention grabbing." The teacher agreed that Matt had an introduction, but he did not have a good hook. Jeff then followed with a question.

Compared to the first discussion with six participants, this discussion had eleven students involved. They had seen the process during the first conference, and they had seen students making meaning together. Reticent students were not forced out of their comfort zone, but rather, they were eased into the discussion by the teacher seeking non-verbal communication and answers to simple questions. She then addressed another student directly, asking for her input. The input offered by that student was critical to the student writer's revision. By the time the second discussion ended, all but one student present on the day of the conference had participated in some way in the discussion.

The teacher carefully facilitated participation from all students. Korey was a student who had to be pulled into the discussion by the teacher, but he joined enthusiastically, later stating, "I feel that I am a real student in the class, not just a number." Community membership (Ching, 2011) was important to Korey as he worked with the others in this class.

Class conference discussions acknowledge the way students learn. Speech and interactions with knowledgeable others are an effective way to develop cognitive skills (Vygotsky, 1978). Students were actively involved in the class discussions. They were invested in the conference process, listening to each other, following along on drafts, and writing down ideas. Students were able to participate

as they were ready. Not all students spoke right away, but by the fifth conference, each student had verbally participated in conference discussions.

During discussions, students could see the writers' reactions to the ideas of participants. If writers were responding to comments with questions or more comments, the students could tell that ideas were being considered. Student writers could ask questions and talk about ideas. Writing talk is important for writing development. As Newkirk (2015) stated, "We need talk, and a receptive audience, to build understanding and to know what we know." Class writing conferences provide that crucial opportunity.

Once students offered their essays for class conference and received feedback, they could see how the discussions affected their own writing processes and compare their experiences to other writers. Students had time to think about what kind of talk helped their writing (Sperling, 1990), so they took the time to offer thoughtful, specific comments to other writers. Lisa stated in the end-of-study survey, "As the semester went on, there was definitely more specific feedback and in depth. More people knew what to say and how to say it, which made it easier for the writer to make their [sic] work better."

Focus of Writing Evaluation

Students in this study evaluated writing, commenting on content and grammar in writing and during the discussions. During the introduction to the conference method, the focus on meaning was discussed. The protocol that began with content comments reinforced the importance of what type of comments are helpful to writers. Both general and specific comments were also discussed to show students how each type of comment could affect student writing. Students experienced revising their writing after considering feedback from others. They learned to give effective, specific feedback.

As students commented on papers, they showed their focus on ideas and meaning through their written feedback. Ten of the fourteen student participants focused more on content than grammar in eleven of thirteen conferences. Brooke commented that the conference process changed the way she approached feedback because it makes her now look at the essay "as a whole."

Comments made to students were both general and specific. Emma wrote a general comment to Matt about his essay, saying the "essay went well from beginning to end." She liked the flow of the essay and thought Matt's voice sounded natural. She made a specific comment about description: "Be more descriptive about your sport and how you felt, show emotions."

During Olivia's conference, Jeff began with general content comments before moving to specific statements. He underlined what he labeled as good sentences in two paragraphs and asked for elaboration in the third paragraph. He liked the specific examples included about the main character. He also stated, "Great use of expression of feelings and descriptions of how she went out of her way, multiple different ways to just help someone out." Students progressed to writing specific content comments that writers could consider as they revised their essays.

Class writing conferences required that students be invested in the process. Students spent class time reading and responding to writing orally and in writing. Careful consideration was given to the writers and their shared writing, and students offered multiple comments to each writer. Students offered specific, evaluative feedback that gave writers ideas to consider as they made choices about their writing. "This is truly response. It feels like they actually care that they want my paper to be the best that it can be," said Brooke describing her composition classmates.

As conferences progressed, students spent more time developing comments to help student writers. Comments became more specific as students gained experience responding to writing. Students saw the benefits of their active involvement with evaluation of writing because they learned how to effectively evaluate others' writing and how to apply what they learned to their own writing. Evaluating writing in writing and in discussions kept students thinking about writing and their own writing processes. Students were immersed in the real work of writing workshop during these weekly class conferences.

Conclusion

While the use of this conference method requires a commitment of class time and a commitment to the practice, the multiple exposures to writing talk this strategy provides facilitate developmental steps for learning the process of writing and the transferability of skills learned. Students develop metacognitive awareness about what helps them to learn. They consider intent when revising, give constructive feedback, and retain their own authority when writing and evaluating writing. They play an active role in learning new ideas and progressing their understanding of writing. Class conferences provide an engaging activity where students can practice critical thinking skills far beyond that offered in a traditional small group or paired peer review.

Students valued their learning in this class. They also valued the learning environment and worked to maintain it by actively supporting others. Student experience in class writing conferences affected their learning. Writing evaluation and revisions became more sophisticated as students gained experience. Class writing conferences put all students in an active role where they exhibited their independent thinking. Their learning of concepts was as individual as the papers they wrote, but participation in the conferences helped all students learn something about writing. Student learning went beyond writing concepts as they evaluated the conference method and their own learning. They shared how they used elements of this method with writing assignments in other classes. Students also communicated what helped them learn and what processes they have developed as a result of class writing conference participation.

This type of conference is not a replacement for traditional forms of conferring about writing; rather, it promotes all types of writing conferences by clearly showing students the benefits of talking about writing. Once students see conferencing as a valuable activity, they will invest more of themselves in it. Class conferences teach students the value of conferencing, and the process acknowledges how students learn. This method is a practical option for first-year undergraduate composition classes where students can learn effective response to writing while developing independent learning skills. It teaches students how to be active participants in their own learning and gives them multiple opportunities to practice this way of learning. Class writing conferences promote learning behaviors that lead to intellectual development: active learning, development of questions, acceptance of learning responsibility, critical thinking, and collaboration. The use of class conferences in undergraduate composition classes clearly shows students the benefits that come from writing talk.

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APPENDIX A--Interview Talking Points

- Noted changes
- Suggestions by Dr. C
- What suggestions did you take from classmates? Can you show me the comments you took?
- Discussion vs. written comments
- Teacher speaks after each comment--How do you feel about that?
- Who helps you most?
- What questions do you have as you write?
- What do you think about this conference process?
- Has this conference practice changed your revision process? If so, how?
- How did you improve your paper?
- How do you feel about yourself as a writer?

APPENDIX B--End of Study Survey Questions

1. What specific writing skills have you learned from class writing conferences?

2. Which part of the conference, the discussion or the written comments, did you find more useful for your revision? Explain. Please address both student and teacher comments.

3. Do you learn from participating in class conferences on other students' writing? If so, what have you learned?

4. How has the feedback you have given others changed throughout the semester?

5. What is your opinion of the class conference process? Be specific.

6. Please write any additional comments you have about this process.